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ABSTRACT

This document synthesizes the 1999 National Center on Educational Outcomes report on special education outcomes, subtitled "A Report on State Activities at the End of the Century," and reviews the changes in states' assessment policies and practices for students with disabilities over the past decade. The report finds that despite the fact that the number of students with disabilities participating in statewide testing programs increased significantly during the 1990s, only 23 states were able to provide participation data for the 1999 survey. For the 23 states, the participation rates varied from 15 percent to 100 percent. Issues influencing participation rates included attaching high stakes to test performance, and the lack of exposure for students with disabilities to the curriculum content on which tests are based. The report also found that states are working on developing policy related to alternate assessment standards as well as developing assessment approaches. Test results were primarily used to guide statewide policy, curriculum or instruction, decisions about school reform, decisions about individual students, or for informal reasons. The report found most states have begun publicly reporting on the performance of students with disabilities in reports that include all test takers. (CR)

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SYNTHESIS BRIEF
STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES IN STATE ASSESSMENTS: THE NCEO STATE REPORTS

PROJECT FORUM AT NASDSE
By
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Synthesis Brief

Students with Disabilities in State Assessments: The NCEO State Reports

Prepared by Eileen M. Ahearn, Ph.D. **Project FORUM at NASDSE** **August 2000**

Introduction

The 1999 National Center on Educational Outcomes (NCEO) report on special education outcomes, subtitled *A Report on State Activities at the End of the Century,* is the latest in a series of reports that started in 1991 to track developments in state assessment of educational outcomes for students with disabilities.[1] This document synthesizes the 1999 report and reviews the changes in states' assessment policies and practices for students with disabilities over the past decade. This synthesis is part of Project FORUM's Cooperative Agreement (#H159K70002) with the U. S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP).

Background

NCEO was established in 1990 to work with state departments of education and others to facilitate the development and use of indicators of educational outcomes for students with disabilities. In its first few years, the Center developed a model of outcomes for all students including students with disabilities, and then focused on issues in the measurement of those outcomes. The Center's review of all types of national and state data collection programs resulted in an estimate that 40 to 50 percent of school-age students with disabilities had been excluded, seriously hampering the ability to extract and use policy-relevant data to improve outcomes for this population (McGrew, Thurlow, Shriner and Spiegel, 1992).

From the start, one of NCEO's tasks has been to document how states were measuring the progress of students with disabilities and how they were using that data to influence policy and program development. The state reports started in 1991 and were published annually until 1995, then biannually thereafter.

The Center has also focused on the changes relative to student assessment in the 1997 amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). For the first time, this law required states to ensure that:

- *Children with disabilities are included in general State and district-wide assessment programs, with appropriate accommodations and modifications in administration.*

....and that the state:

- *Develops guidelines for the participation of children with disabilities in alternate assessments for those children who cannot participate in State and district-wide assessment programs, develops alternate assessments for those children and, beginning not later than, July 1, 2000, conducts the alternate assessments* [34 CFR §300.138].

[1] The full documents referred to in this synthesis as well as other publications are available on the NCEO web site at: www.coled.umn.edu/nceo/

EC 308037

The work of NCEO now includes a strong emphasis on research and technical assistance to states on the myriad of complex issues involved in state implementation of these requirements.

Documenting Change

A brief review of state-level data on progress for students with disabilities illustrates the dramatic changes that have occurred in recent years. For example, in 1991:

- Use of the term "participation" was confined to the type and level of program that students with disabilities attended, with no reference to participation in assessments.
- There was almost no state-level information available about the academic progress of students with disabilities. The 1991 state survey revealed that 14 states had data on the highest grade level attained by students with disabilities, and 10 states collected information about grade retention. But, although it was known that some students with disabilities were included in state assessments, there were no disaggregated data available on academic achievement for these students.
- Data collection at the state level was confined to elements mandated by state and/or federal requirements.

The major issues in the assessment of students with disabilities that have evolved during the 1990s are the focus of the 1999 report: rates of participation in assessments, alternate assessment, and the reporting and use of assessment results. The remainder of this synthesis will summarize past and current state activities in these areas.

Participation of Students with Disabilities in State Assessments

The issue of participation of students with disabilities in state assessments is replete with confusion because of the varying methods of conceptualizing the issue and calculating the statistics. For example, the 1992 survey notes that 35 states responded that they could identify some students with disabilities in their data sets on achievement tests, but only rough estimates were available as to what percentage of the total special education population those students represented. Subsequent state reports continued to note the difficulty of obtaining information on the participation of students with disabilities in state assessments, and the inability of states to disaggregate or use these data even when those students could be identified in state data sets. The 1996 NCEO document, *Neglected Numerators, Drifting Denominators, and Fractured Fractions* (Erickson, Thurlow and Ysseldyke, 1996) summarizes the problem and makes recommendations for changes that could deal with the participation dilemma.

Despite the fact that the number of students with disabilities participating in statewide testing programs increased significantly during the 1990s, only 23 states were able to provide participation data for the 1999 survey. Federal law now requires all states to report the number of students with disabilities participating in state assessments. NCEO staff converted the numbers from the 23 states into percentages to examine rates of participation for students with disabilities, and found the rates varied from 15 percent to 100 percent.

The related issue of state guidelines for participation in assessments has also been tracked in the NCEO reports. The number grew steadily until, by 1995, a total of 43 states had written policies in place, and all but seven states had policies with dates more recent than 1991. Absent or poorly written policies had virtually disappeared as a factor in discouraging participation by 1999. Variation in the implementation of guidelines at the local level was documented as a slowly decreasing but continuing concern in all the reports. Other issues influencing participation rates that were cited as critical in 1999 included attaching high stakes to test performance, and the lack of exposure for students with disabilities to the curriculum content on which tests are based.

Alternate Assessments

Alternate assessment is the term now used for the students with disabilities who cannot participate in state and district testing even with the use of accommodations. Originally termed "alternative assessments," they are first mentioned in the NCEO state reports in 1992. At that time, the alternative was typically based on the IEP, involving some measurement of goal achievement.

The issue cited as the most critical in terms of outcomes information in the 1995 NCEO report was "adequacy of assessments for students with disabilities." However, there was little state activity in this area prior to adoption of the 1997 amendments to IDEA

The 1997 NCEO report noted that, despite the new mandate to implement and report on alternate assessments by July 2000, most states had no activity under way. Only one state had put a program in place, one other state was at the pilot testing stage, and another 18 states reported some activity at the discussion or formal planning stage. By 1999, however, the picture had changed dramatically. States were working on developing policy related to alternate assessment standards as well as developing assessment approaches. The approaches identified in the state survey in order of preference were: a) observation of the student either directly or by video, b) a student portfolio, c) performance assessment; d) surveys, e) review of progress, f) some form of adaptation of the state assessment, and g) an adaptive behavior scale. Because of the rapidly changing developments in this area, NCEO has developed an Alternate Assessment Online Survey that became operational in October 1997; 43 states had entered their data by the end of 1999. In addition to the challenges posed by the standards and type of assessment to be used, other critical issues identified in the 1999 report included the development of decision rules for participation in an alternate assessment, and the number of students who would ultimately be included.

Reporting and Use of Assessment Results

Significant change is also evident in the reporting and use of assessment data for students with disabilities during the 1990s. In the earlier part of the decade, state-level achievement data were used most frequently for required reporting to local school districts and state agencies. But, by 1995, the NCEO report reflects an increasing involvement of special education in the broader educational reform movement. For example, the states that use academic achievement data on students with disabilities for local or state accountability increased dramatically from 17 percent to 91 percent between 1991 and 1995. However, in 1997, only 13 states said that such statewide assessment data were being used for the purpose of improving special education programming. States did report other diverse uses for such data such as monitoring or setting priorities for funding, but most were still at the planning stage in this area.

The 1997 report also began a discussion of the importance of disaggregating state assessment data for students with disabilities. At that time, 22 states did not yet disaggregate those scores for separate analysis. The major reason given by the states that did disaggregate was to report on the performance of students with disabilities. However, another reason given was to remove the data on students with disabilities from further analysis or reporting. The primary reasons states gave for not disaggregating the scores were lack of time, lack of resources, and an inability to identify students with disabilities in state data bases. Twenty-six states reported that they included scores for students with disabilities in state reports, but these were primarily targeted for internal review by state and/or local administrators. Only 12 states reported including disaggregated performance data on students with disabilities in their regularly released reports on educational outcomes, and one state produced a separate public report that exclusively featured results for students with disabilities.

It is frequently noted that the accountability aspect of school reform has focused narrowly on academic test results. The 1997 NCEO report contains a discussion of the measuring of non-academic outcomes for students with disabilities. It notes that the field of special education has always emphasized individual planning and appropriate transition, and embraced outcomes that go beyond the "3 Rs." Despite its relevance, states indicated that data on non-academic domains are not routinely collected or published.

The 1999 NCEO report begins its discussion of data reporting by noting that there is now a requirement to disaggregate the performance of students with disabilities on regular assessments and to report them in the same way as results of other students. (The IDEA deadline for this reporting was no later than July 1, 1998 [34 CFR §300.139(a)(2)].) All states with statewide assessments reported that the test scores of test-takers receiving special education were disaggregated by that year. Significant changes were also reported in the major use for these data. Test results were primarily used to guide statewide policy, curriculum or instruction, decisions about school reform, decisions about individual students, or for informal reasons. Most states have begun publicly reporting on the performance of students with disabilities in reports that include all test takers, but 7 states do issue a report that covers only students with disabilities. A few states still restrict the reporting of the separate special education analyses to internal use by state, district or local personnel.

Concluding Observations

The educational reform movement remains committed to accountability for *all* students, and this includes the full spectrum of students with disabilities. Many difficult problems remain in how to demonstrate progress toward that goal. The most critical challenges confronting states include how students with disabilities will be affected by the adoption of promotion or high school graduation exams, and various technical issues related to test construction, accommodations, and modifications. Every state acknowledges a need for training of personnel at all levels, and for sharing information on the rapidly evolving research and practice on the inclusion of students with disabilities in state assessments. The NCEO reports address these needs by tracking the status of developments in all states and identifying current critical issues in the area of assessment of outcomes for students with disabilities.

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